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ABSTRACT

This booklet offers strategies for leading small groups as they investigate the status of school reform. The tools described were used in the collection of information from focus groups in New York, Massachusetts, and Vermont. Some of the groups were comprised of school practitioners, while others were made up of providers of support to schools, such as professional developers and professors in teacher-preparation colleges. A conscious effort was made to include people who occupy different places in the systems that link state policy to the classroom. Members of each group were brought together to reflect on the reforms taking place and on the systems that support or could support those reforms. To facilitate these meetings, groups of 8-15 people were asked to focus quickly and thoughtfully on each of 3 areas. Some of the topics include the roles assumed by the state department of education in leading reform, philosophies of reform and change reflected in state education department strategies, state department of education relationships with other facets of the education system, and the reception of reform initiatives in the field. The tools used for each group are outlined and include information about their use, key features, and suggestions for adaptation. (RJM)

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ED 448 502

Discussing Reform:
Tools for Facilitating a Focus Group

in partnership with RMC
RMC Research Corporation

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Discussing Reform:
Tools for Facilitating a Focus Group

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University
and RMC Research Corporation

January 2000

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory At Brown University (LAB)

The LAB, a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, is one of ten federally supported educational laboratories in the nation. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policy making community.

The LAB develops educational products and services for school administrators, policymakers, teachers, and parents in New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Central to our efforts is a commitment to equity and excellence.

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What is in this document?

This paper includes a set of tools designed for leading small groups in investigating the status of school reform. These tools were developed as part of a study by the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) of the changing roles of state departments of education.

This study involved collecting information from focus groups in several states. Some of the groups were comprised of school practitioners, while others were made up of providers of supports to schools (professional developers, professors in teacher preparation colleges, etc.). Members of each group were brought together one time to reflect on the reforms taking place in the schools they know and on the systems that support or could support those reforms. To facilitate these meetings, it was necessary to help groups of eight to fifteen people—some of whom did not know each other—to focus quickly and thoughtfully on each of three areas under discussion. The questions and activities used to provide this focus are the subject of this paper.

For applied research that requires reflection by informants on complex issues, focus groups represent an increasingly useful approach. The tools provided here have been successfully adapted to discussions of varied but specific reform initiatives in very different state environments. They have been used in urban, suburban and rural areas. At focus groups in which variations of these processes have been used, participants have reported that they found the conversations informative, provocative, and enjoyable. Some participants who use focus groups in their work have asked whether they could adapt the tools and processes for their own use.

Based on such response from participants and on the richness of the data we collected for the LAB's study, we believe the format of these tools will be of interest to other researchers.

Part I:
Study of State Strategies

LAB Study of State Strategies

When the leadership team of the LAB met in the spring of 1996 with education leaders in each state and territory of the region, one of the research priorities identified was related to the changing roles of state education departments.

State leaders explained that their departments of education have for several years been in a period of vital transition, with their reforms going well beyond procedural changes and adoptions of new programs and curricula. The reforms of both the standards movement and the federal legislation of the 1990s have called for complex and comprehensive changes in every school and classroom. At the same time, state departments of education have been changing. Most are now smaller than they were ten years ago, and they have made concerted efforts to move their relationships with schools away from regulation and monitoring and toward vision-setting, support, and capacity-building. Several of the region's state-level leaders asked the LAB to help them study new leadership and support roles adopted by state departments of education, including the role of commissioners. The goal was to determine whether role changes have proved sufficient and effective for scaling up deep reform in today's standards-based education environment.

Working in the fall of 1996 with commissioners' representatives from Massachusetts, New York and Vermont, we identified a framework of issues that commissioners and state departments of education would like to better understand as a result of taking part in this study. The full framework of questions they raised is available elsewhere. The areas of inquiry are summed up as follows:

- ***Roles assumed by the state department of education in leading reform***

  These include responding to demand or creating new directions, disseminating well developed programs and procedures or initiating local design efforts, and working directly with schools or through intermediate agents.

- ***Philosophies of reform and change reflected in state education department strategies***

  These can be related to the level of the school system targeted for information, flexibility regarding local implementation, and connections drawn between initiatives.

- ***State department of education relationships with other facets of the education system***

  These include linkages between state initiatives and the work of universities, unions, or professional organizations, as well as new networks or structures created to support reforms.

- ***Reception of reform initiatives in the field***

  This includes differences in the ability of various kinds of schools or categories of teachers to implement specific reforms, as well as local ownership of the goals of the reforms.

Based on our inquiry into these areas, the LAB is developing principles and guidance for use by state-level policymakers across the region.

Data collection

In order to answer the questions about the roles and strategies adopted by state education departments, it was important to view the issues from multiple perspectives. For example, by working with more than one state, we could see a variety of strategies across different educational and organizational cultures. For that reason, we chose to work with Connecticut, New York and Vermont.

In each state we spoke with people who occupy different places in the systems that link state policy to the classroom. This enabled us to hear how widely approaches from state departments of education have reached, how clearly intentions have been transmitted, and by what means this occurred. Because these questions required deep discussion of complex circumstances, we used focus groups for some of our data collection. In each state we met with groups at three levels of the reform system:

Practitioners
Classroom teachers, building administrators and district administrators

Support system
Staff developers, teacher network leaders, managers of agencies established to support specific programs or initiatives, professors from teacher preparation institutions, trainers from professional organizations

State policymakers
Commissioner, senior state department of education staff, state board of education representative, key legislator

At the practitioner and support system levels, we conducted multiple focus groups in each state. This made it possible to hear from people in urban, suburban, and rural settings; from different areas of the state; and from both resource-rich and resource-poor school districts.

About focus groups

The focus group is a specific group interview technique. Groups are generally small (six to twenty-two participants in our study), and participants are selected to be representative of a broader population. In each of our New York and Vermont practitioner focus groups, for instance, we had teachers and administrators from different subject areas and grade levels, staff of high-achieving schools and low-achieving schools, and people with different degrees of familiarity with specific support strategies being used by the state department of education. A focus group is tightly facilitated and is structured around a set of questions. The purpose of the meeting is to elicit from the participants detailed responses to these questions.

Focus groups are an increasingly valued part of a repertoire of tools for applied research and have specific advantages. First, they allow the researcher to investigate the complexities and individual experiences behind the kind of initial answer one might get on a survey. They allow informants, or subjects of research, to participate in and shape the analysis of findings. And, in a way that individual interviews cannot, they allow informants to learn from and influence each other and to elaborate their ideas based on the contributions of others.

Still, these advantages are accompanied by limitations. One is that a focus group is not interchangeable with a survey. The group, while representative, is always small and is rarely the kind of structured sample from which one would draw statistical inferences. So focus groups are used to illuminate a complex and/or subjective issue rather than to describe an entire population. Also, because the data derived from a focus group come out of deep conversation, the number of questions must be kept small. In short, these groups provide depth rather than breadth, which places a responsibility on their designers and facilitators to know enough about an issue in advance to ask important questions that do not have simple answers. Also required is a structure that brings a group together quickly (focuses it) so that all participants are addressing the same issue, albeit from their different perspectives.

The tools that follow are examples of the ones LAB staff developed, in consultation with two state departments of education, for the range of groups described earlier. We have adapted these formats to different content in each state. Across these contexts, we have found that such tools accomplish the following: allow a group to exchange more information than there is time to discuss, focus conversation quickly on important and complex questions, place value on each participant's experience, and provoke lively conversation. And, critical to a focus group, they do this without a great deal of explanation by the facilitator, leaving the bulk of the meeting time for participants to talk.

Participants in each of the focus groups we have conducted for this study have said they enjoyed and learned from the conversation. We hope that other researchers investigating other questions will find these formats equally effective.

Agenda for a practitioner focus group

Four of the following five instruments for focusing conversation and collecting additional information were used in one series of focus groups in New York state. The participants in these groups were practitioners: teachers and administrators. The study in New York did not focus on any single initiative, but rather on all the efforts of the New York State Education Department to support the implementation of challenging standards in all the state's schools.

The following outline describes time allocations and materials for these three-hour focus groups. Each of items B - D represents a separate conversation, with its own initial activity to focus discussion. The tools used in these initial activities and in agenda item E can be found on pages 7-15 of this paper, along with suggestions for their use and adaptation.

	Activity	Minutes	Materials
A	Welcome and introductions; overview of purpose of study, purpose of focus group, and organization of the meeting	15	✓ Name tags ✓ Participant list ✓ Background information about the study and the LAB for participants to take home
B	Understandings and implementation of reforms: questionnaire and discussion	45	✓ Two-page survey (pp. 7-8) ✓ Blue and yellow index cards ✓ Card display stand
C	State roles and strategies in scaling up reform: dot voting and discussion	60, including break *	✓ One-page summary of eight strategy scales (pg. 10) ✓ Eight wall posters with one scale each ✓ Adhesive dots
D	Support systems for reform: questionnaire and discussion	45	✓ Two-page survey (pp. 12-13) ✓ Blue and yellow index cards ✓ Card display stand
E	"The Last Word": questionnaire	10	✓ One-page survey (pp. 15)
F	Wrap-up	5	

* Because these practitioner focus groups were held from 4 to 8 p.m., the time most convenient for the practitioners, we served a light dinner at this point in the evening. For meetings at other times of day, with a more conventional 15-minute break, this agenda item was completed in 45 minutes and the 15 minutes saved was redistributed.

Part II:
Focus Group Tools

Focus Group Tools

The paper tools used in the New York practitioner focus groups follow on pages 7-15. For each we provide information about its use, its key features, and suggestions for adaptation. One such adaptation is found on pages 17-19, in a tool used with support system focus groups in Vermont.

Understandings and implementation of reforms: practitioner questionnaire

This two-page questionnaire is designed to elicit two kinds of responses. The first page provides the focus for discussion. The second page asks for information about which the New York State Education Department was interested regarding the status of several specific initiatives; this information was collected for the LAB study but not discussed in the focus group. The full instrument is completed in 5 minutes, leaving 40 minutes for the discussion that is the data of focus groups. The questionnaire is collected before the group adjourns.

The first page consists of a series of matched statements. Each participant works alone to read these statements and check the one in each pair — either the statement in the blue column or the statement in the yellow column — with which he or she most nearly agrees. (When the questionnaires are used, the "blue" heading is actually colored blue and the "yellow" heading is colored yellow.) Each pair of statements has the following characteristics:

- The statements are unambivalent and for all practical purposes opposite, forcing the respondent to "take a stand," or identify his or her opinion.
- The statements are personal opinions based on experience, establishing immediately that subjective experience is the basis of the discussion.
- The statements are descriptive rather than judgmental, so that a participant need not feel defensive about his or her choice.
- The more "desirable" statements, the ones that suggest further progress in implementing reform or closer agreement with state policy, do not always appear in the same column, so that neither blue nor yellow becomes identified with the right answer.

The blue and yellow headings facilitate the sharing of responses across the group. Each participant has at his or her seat one blue index card, one yellow index card, and a holder to display one card. (Holders available commercially to display name cards work very well, or the facilitator can make them by folding card stock into a "tent" with a pocket or "ledge" on the front side.) Displaying responses serves multiple purposes. First, there is not time in the 40 minutes provided to discuss all the questions on this questionnaire; the group can probably discuss three questions at the depth one looks for in a focus group. Displaying answers to the questions not discussed satisfies the group's curiosity about how others responded. Second, the displayed cards aid discussion.

The facilitator can ask to hear from those who responded yellow before those who responded blue, or ask someone to explain a yellow response if only those who responded blue have spoken. And participants know when they explain their responses whether they are in the majority or minority and gauge the detail of their explanations accordingly.

Going into the meeting, the facilitator will have an idea about which three questions he would most like to have the group discuss—that is, on which three questions he most wants to collect data. We suggest that the facilitator maintain some flexibility here to allow participants to add or substitute questions that are most compelling for them, or to discuss a question with a particularly interesting response pattern.

The facilitator should explain at the beginning of the meeting, and again as participants begin to complete this questionnaire, that these instruments are meant to start discussion and the "real data" are the group's discussions. Still, a participant may take exception to the wording of a statement on the questionnaire or find it impossible to choose between the blue and yellow statements in a specific pair. The facilitator should take this opportunity to reinforce that it is the discussion that is important, and ask the participant what it is in his or her experience that makes this statement or this choice difficult.

Because the data do lie in the discussion, it is vital to capture a detailed record of this and subsequent discussions in the focus group. We recommend having a second researcher, who understands the purpose of the meeting and is neutral on these issues, take detailed notes. We also recommend having the notetaker and facilitator take time immediately after the meeting to fill in the notes and identify major themes of the discussion. Alternatives include tape recording or having a single researcher facilitate discussion and at the same time capture key points on flipchart pages.

We have pointed out that the second page of this questionnaire was collected but not discussed in our focus groups. In each of the states in which we conducted this study, the state department of education chose to use this opportunity to gather information about the status of specific initiatives. In one state this additional information provided a context that allowed state staff to better understand the data in the discussions. In another, it provided an opportunity for feedback on some specific policy decisions the state education department was about to make. In a third state, it allowed us to collect data for two inquiries at one meeting. These are all reasonable accommodations between the researcher and client. When considering adding survey-only questions, consider three things. First, how much time will the additional questions take away from focus group discussion? Second, are the additional survey questions compatible with the discussion questions, i.e., do they ask participants to think about details that may inform their responses to the discussion questions, or do they set up a competing agenda? Third, does the client understand the limitations of such a small sample?

We should note that the content of this questionnaire deals broadly with school reform because the inquiry in New York state was quite broad. The same formats can be used for a more narrowly-focused inquiry by narrowly focusing the questions asked.

FOCUS GROUP TOOL 1

Understandings and implementation of reforms

	BLUE	check one			YELLOW
1	"Implementing high standards and raising the achievement of all students" is a good description of where our change efforts are focused.			1	Our local needs and efforts are focused elsewhere.
2	We are incorporating elements of the standards frameworks into existing teaching practice (e.g., cross referencing lessons to standards or adding activities).			2	We are rethinking our teaching assumptions and strategies, using the standards frameworks as a foundation to make substantial reforms in practice.
3	We have needs assessment and planning processes in place that make it possible for us to identify and achieve the major changes we need to make in the learning environment.			3	Our needs assessment and planning processes seem to consume a lot of energy without leading to substantial improvements in our learning environment.
4	We use state and local student assessment results to inform curriculum revisions, professional development, and community dialogue.			4	Student assessments are not particularly helpful to us for revising curriculum, planning professional development, or community dialog.
5	It is difficult for our school (district) to make progress because of competing convictions about the direction we should take.			5	We know where we need to go as a school and district and support each other on that journey.
6	My district would require a new set of skills and/or a new base of knowledge to achieve a high-standards learning environment for every child.			6	My district has the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve a high-standards learning environment for every child; all we need is the opportunity and support.

7 For each of the initiatives below, indicate if you are knowledgeable about it personally, if your school (or district) is involved in or implementing it, and if it is central to your school's (or district's) reform efforts. An X indicates "yes", a blank indicates "no".

	personally knowledgeable	*we are involved/ implementing*	*central to our reforms*
Commissioner's Regulation 100.11, shared decision making	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Developing standards-based curriculum	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
An All-Regents program	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
New assessments	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Schoolwide program	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Early literacy programming	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Universal pre-kindergarten	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
New diploma requirements	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

8 What is the one thing your school (or district or community) is doing that is most powerful for helping you become the kind of school(s) you want to be? (This does not have to be anything on the list above or anything associated with the State Education Department.)

State roles and strategies in scaling up reform: dot voting

In much of the discussion in these focus groups we asked about things—such as the status of reforms and the support system—from which we infer the reach and effects of state department of education strategies. It has also been important for the purposes of this study to ask focus group participants directly what approaches they have seen at the state level.

We used the following instrument, without modifying wording or format, with focus groups in all three of the states in which we conducted this study. We used it both with practitioner groups and with support system groups. Because this exercise created a common data set across groups, we were able to compare responses across states, initiatives, and/or groups.

The scales on this instrument come from the inquiry framework (see page 1) developed with state department of education representatives. The questions that can be framed in comparisons such as "Has the state department chosen to act in manner A or manner B?" are represented as scales here. Note that the participant not only identifies one of two competing strategies as dominant (the left or right side of the scale) but also rates on a 1 to 5 continuum how strongly (or consistently) the state department acts in that way.

We prepare the room for this exercise before the meeting by posting eight large posters around the wall, with each poster containing one scale. Each participant has at his seat eight large adhesive dots (available at office supply stores). Participants are asked to think about the initiative that has been the topic of the meeting and to identify the state department of education's roles and strategies within that initiative. Responses are shared by silent dot voting; that is, participants indicate their responses to each question by placing a dot on the appropriate place on the scale. Each participant places one dot on each of the eight posters. To help participants organize their "votes" before going to the posters on the wall, we hand out the single sheet included here on page 10.

When voting is completed, we begin the discussion by asking which of the posters interests or intrigues participants. This is usually one on which there is a strongly split opinion. As with the earlier discussion, this is an opportunity for participants to share their different experiences and frames of reference. And as with the earlier discussion, there is not time to discuss all eight scales. The researchers collect the posters at the end of the day so that the surface-level responses to all questions are captured.

We placed this activity in the center of our three-hour meetings for several reasons. It gets people up from their chairs and moving around in the middle of the meeting, and so combines well with a break. It is also a mental change of pace, a different kind of conversation starter between two that are very much alike. This discussion also allows people to air their observations and opinions about state department of education activities so that, when we move on in the next conversation to the larger support system, that time need not all be taken up talking about the state department.

In a variation on this activity, participants in Vermont were given eight each of two different colors of dots. These groups, which were discussing standards and assessment initiatives, voted with one color for state strategies regarding standards frameworks and another color for those regarding assessments. The discussion that followed dealt largely with why different strategies seem to have been adopted in different initiatives.

State roles and strategies in scaling up reform

In scaling up these reforms statewide, the State Education Department has . . .

5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5
acted in a rule-making and monitoring role										acted in an assistance and capacity-building role

5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5
advocated a specific approach by schools										supported multiple approaches by schools

5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5
set a modest pace, stages										aimed for full implementation, all at once

5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5
expected implementation and use everywhere										expected implementation and use in pockets

5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5
used authoritarian processes										used democratic processes

5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5
provided incentives and rewards										provided corrections and penalties

5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5
expected local adaptations										expected uniformity

5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5
focused on integrating these initiatives with other goals										dealt with these initiatives in isolation

Support systems for reform: participant questionnaire

At this point in our practitioner focus groups, practitioners will have talked about their experiences with the initiative(s) under discussion and the strategies used by the state education department in advancing that initiative. Our third discussion is about the nature and quality of the supports available to and used by schools for the initiative. One of the premises of our study is that the partnerships the state department of education forms, the intermediaries it uses to carry its messages, and the new initiative-specific networks and structures it creates are central features of the new strategies.

The conversation-starting exercise for this discussion is in the format used for the first discussion. Once again participants have five minutes to complete the two-page questionnaire and 40 minutes to discuss approximately three of the questions on the first page. Once again the second page is not discussed. Rather, it is used to help collect specific information about which the state education department is interested—in this case about which supports are useful. The questionnaire is collected.

Looking at this instrument offers an opportunity to reflect further on the nature of a focus group interview. If the main objective of the meeting were to collect the kind of information on the second page, it would be more efficient to mail a survey. One could ask many more questions of this "yes or no" variety and could ask them of many more people. A researcher will choose a focus group over a survey when the questions are more complex, when the possible range of answers is not known, and/or when it is valuable to have respondents compare experiences. To capitalize on this opportunity the discussion time should move as quickly as possible beyond "yes or no" and into "why," "how," "under what circumstances," and "with what result."

These are questions that will lead where the group takes them, and not everyone will engage in every part of the conversation. If, in addition to this rich conversation, the researcher or client wants to be sure to leave the meeting having learned everyone's answer to a specific closed-ended question such as "Do you use the NYSED Web site?" an efficient way to obtain those answers is with a brief survey embedded in the meeting. The second page of this instrument is such a brief survey and meets the criteria discussed earlier: completing it takes very little time and it reminds participants of features of the support system, possibly enriching their discussion.

FOCUS GROUP TOOL 3

Support systems for reform

	BLUE	check one			YELLOW
1	The messages our school (or district) receives about where our reforms should be going and how to get there are consistent across sources.			1	We hear so many different messages about what reform consists of that there is a lack of focus.
2	The support system necessary for successful standards-based reform is not yet in place.			2	The supports available to teachers, schools, and communities from various sources is sufficient for standards-based reform of instruction and assessment.
3	The people whose behaviors must be supported or modified in order for reform to succeed are appropriately targeted by communication and assistance strategies.			3	The people who ultimately must make changes if reforms are to succeed are not receiving needed information and support.
4	Supports are focused on specific knowledge acquisition or procedural change by individuals, and so are not creating conditions for self-renewing reform in schools or communities.			4	The supports being provided to teachers, schools, and/or communities are creating self-sustaining change processes that are likely to continue after the supports are gone.
5	In leading standards-based instructional and assessment reforms, the State Education Department is responding to needs expressed in the schools and communities of the state.			5	The State Education Department is creating a new dialogue about standards-based reform, striving to persuade schools and communities of the need for such reform.

6 For each of the following sources of information and support, please indicate in the first column which you rely on most to get clear information about what you should be doing in your reforms. Then indicate in the second column which you rely on for help in getting there.

	get sense of	***get implementation***
Printed policies and guidance from the State Education Department	[ ]	[ ]
Printed guidance from other sources (example: _____)	[ ]	[ ]
Professional development/training events offered by the State Education	[ ]	[ ]
Professional development/training events offered by other organizations (example: _____)	[ ]	[ ]
State Education Department public forums	[ ]	[ ]
State Education Department staff	[ ]	[ ]
School district central office staff	[ ]	[ ]
Staff within my and other	[ ]	[ ]
BOCES staff	[ ]	[ ]
Teacher Resource Centers	[ ]	[ ]
Professional membership organizations (ASCD, NYSUT, NYSACE, etc.)	[ ]	[ ]
State-sponsored technical assistance centers (BETAC, SETRC, Sharing Success, etc	[ ]	[ ]
Published research	[ ]	[ ]
Internet, including NYSED Web site	[ ]	[ ]
Federal technical assistance centers (NYTAC, NERRC, Eisenhower Alliance, etc.)	[ ]	[ ]
Colleges and universities	[ ]	[ ]
Private consultants	[ ]	[ ]
Other: _____	[ ]	[ ]

"The last word"

We often end a focus group with a brief exercise we have come to call "the last word." The example from our New York state practitioner focus groups follows on page 15. Most often the answers to these one to three questions are not discussed, but they can be. This exercise can be done quickly and allows each participant a final opportunity to be heard by the researcher and the client. The question(s) asked should cover the scope of the entire meeting's conversations. Responses are anonymous, collected, and transcribed without modification as part of the focus group data.

Several things are accomplished by "the last word." A participant who has not spoken a great deal in the discussions gets equal time in this exercise. A participant who has a strong point to make, even if he or she has made them in discussion, can be sure that in this exercise those points will not be "massaged," or combined or translated by the researcher. A participant who has a more articulate or detailed suggestion to make as a result of the full day's discussions than he had earlier in the day can get that suggestion on the record. A well-chosen question can bring back to the main point of the meeting a set of discussions that has ranged far.

We found in our study that the transcription of these last participant statements was often what state department of education partners wanted to read first, the "bottom line" feedback from the field.

FOCUS GROUP TOOL 4

The last word

Based on the State Education Department actions you have observed (not necessarily the written policies), what are the major messages you get from the State about high standards and/or the accompanying new assessments?

What are the most common misunderstandings among practitioners about standards and/or assessment in New York?

If you could tell the State Education Department one thing to do to improve understanding and implementation in schools of high standards and new assessments, what would it be?

Further adaptations: support system questionnaire

Our belief that the formats presented on pages 7-15 can be modified for many research questions and many groups is based on having used such modifications. Our research design required that we collect different data from groups of support providers than from groups of practitioners. Following on pages 17-19 is one questionnaire used in the support system focus groups in Vermont. The basic format is the same one used twice in the New York practitioner groups: color-coded paired statements, the answers to which participants display prior to discussion. The content is quite different and is based in part on the findings from the Vermont practitioner focus groups.

FOCUS GROUP TOOL 5

Implementation and use of standards and assessment framework

	BLUE	check one			YELLOW
1	Most of the important audiences for school reform (teachers, administrators, students, parents, community) understand essential information about Vermont's standards and assessment frameworks.			1	People in schools are just beginning to understand essential information about Vermont's standards and assessment frameworks, and other important audiences are not yet informed.
2	Most schools are using processes for standards and assessment reform that they have used for other initiatives, and therefore have the needed skills and expertise.			2	Most schools are developing new processes and having to acquire new skills to implement standards and assessment reform.
3	Implementing and using the standards and assessments are consistently more difficult for schools or staffs with certain characteristics (e.g., small schools, secondary level teachers) than for others.			3	Differences in difficulty implementing and using the standards and assessments are due largely to individual circumstances, and are not part of any broader pattern.
4	Most schools are incorporating elements of the standards into existing teaching approaches (e.g., cross-referencing lessons to standards or adding activities).			4	Most schools are rethinking their teaching assumptions and strategies, using the standards framework as a foundation to make substantial reforms in practice.
5	Most schools are making use of state and local assessment results to inform curriculum revisions, professional development, and community dialogue.			5	Most schools are not relying on student assessment data to inform their improvement decisions.
6	The standards movement is the best hope for combining excellence with equity for all students, raising the bar for everyone.			6	The standards movement results in benefits for some students at the expense of others.

Specific actions and approaches to advance standards and assessment reform

The following are suggestions by practitioner focus groups (teachers and administrators) about specific actions and approaches the State Department of Education could take next to advance standards and assessment reform. Indicate with which of these ideas you agree. Among those with which you agree, indicate **up to four** which you feel are vital to the success of these reforms.

		Agree	*Vital*
1	Put effort into reinforcing publicly that this is the direction of education reform in Vermont for the long haul.		
2	Provide reform implementation status reports for the state as a whole.	[ ]	[ ]
3	Provide examples of successful implementation strategies of individual teachers, schools, and districts.	[ ]	[ ]
4	Promote positive coverage by the media of progress being made, Vermont's leadership role in standards and assessment, and the professionalism of Vermont's teachers.	[ ]	[ ]
5	Engage institutions of higher education in a more active discussion of using the standards in teaching undergraduates and in preparing teachers.	[ ]	[ ]
6	Clarify the role and purpose of the standards in grades 11 and 12, after the grade 10 assessments.	[ ]	[ ]
7	Articulate expectations (e.g., with benchmarks) for grades 5-6, to facilitate transitions to grade 7.	[ ]	[ ]
8	Provide centralized access to and/or information about locally developed assessments aligned with the standards.	[ ]	[ ]
9	Provide centralized access to and/or information about locally developed units and courses of study aligned with the standards.	[ ]	[ ]
10	Provide guidance about commercial products (curriculum, texts, tests, programs) aligned with the standards.	[ ]	[ ]
11	Provide user-friendly versions or "interpretations" of the standards frameworks to make them approachable for more audiences.	[ ]	[ ]
12	Provide school level interpretations of New Standards Reference Exam results that are explicitly linked to Vermont standards.	[ ]	[ ]
13	Designate or create a dedicated point of contact in each district, beyond the Superintendent, to receive and disseminate information from the State about standards and assessments.	[ ]	[ ]
14	Articulate and reinforce appropriate roles in standards and assessment reform for formal leaders (principals, superintendents).	[ ]	[ ]

Specific actions and approaches to advance standards and assessment reform

Other vital next steps?

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